

Title	Say just what you mean
Authors	Gilson, Jools
Publication date	1995
Original Citation	Gilson-Ellis, J. (1995) 'Say Just What You Mean', The Drama Review, Autumn, 39(4) pp. 173-177. doi: 10.2307/1146492
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/dram - 10.2307/1146492
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Download date	2025-05-09 07:38:27
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10399

Say Just What You Mean

Jools Gilson-Ellis

I flew to New York on the 20th of March with a plan to work in the Lincoln Center Research Libraries, the Performance Studies archive at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts (TSOA), and to meet with Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan about exchange possibilities between our institutions. I had a plan. On my first morning in Manhattan, I decide to walk from 57th Street to the Village for breakfast. After ten blocks, I realise my sense of scale is a bit off and get a cab. When I arrive at the Performance Studies department later that morning, everyone looks distracted; Jackie Allen smiles and gives me a schedule for "The Future of the Field." Wow, I think, I didn't even know about this. In my hotel room, I read the program in detail. Odd coincidences: if I had known, I would have come, and I came anyway. Two days later, I rush from Lincoln Center to see the first evening's performances and sit in the front row. A woman two seats from me says, "He thinks he knows you from somewhere." "I don't think so" I say, "I came from Bumpston." Deb Margolin's *Of Mice, Bugs, and Women* has me giggling at the folds and convolutions of her narratives. At the interval there are drinks and things to dip. I probably should have known about this; I fake it—go with everyone's presumption that I flew here directly with this on my mind. I fumble at starting conversations. No one I speak to has heard of Dartington College of Arts (England) where I teach theatre. I toast the future, and think of wheat fields.

I had happened upon this conference by accident, yet it felt crucial, important, and this contradiction produced much of the tenor of the conference for me. A sense that my accidental visit was somewhat voyeuristic, peeping, and that these American scholars and students were embroiled with each other so heatedly, and in a discourse that had as its primary (sometimes it even seemed transcendental) signifier: American Culture. This dominant referent peeped back at me, stood up and was a lot taller; shifted me uncomfortably as Outsider.

One example: I attend a session entitled Performing Hybridity, which is a combination of performed writing and scholarly papers. Among others, Sikivu Hutchinson reads her beautiful, haunting piece, "Railtime." Bina Sharif performs an extract from "Kill," a difficult, funny, and uncomfortable piece that uses a relentlessly extended metaphor of pissing as a litany for loss, absence, and degradation. "Press 000 0000 and you will know I can piss." May Joseph who chairs the panel and Meena Alexander who is reading some of her poetry, both speak English with accents I feel sure are British. In the curved, syrupy sound of North American accents, these voices are carved differently. I think I hear Britishness. I tell Joseph this later, and she laughs and tells me she is from East

Africa. At the end of the Performing Hybridity session, I ask if any of the women had engaged with British intersections of race, nation, and gender. No one answers. Race and nation in Europe seems such a different historical tangle from this North American one; old colonial ties still singing in the nations' body. I am curious and yearning for this connection between histories of colonialism and histories of slavery. These articulate women before me have moved through their poetry, academic papers. Meena Alexander finally speaks, but it is anecdotal, odd. She says that Prince Charles is trying to preserve *English* English. I am not familiar with the story, but that isn't what worries me. It is that Alexander says to me "Your Prince Charles," a curious slip of the tongue, in a session dedicated to notions of hybridity. As if I owned this royal signifier of Britishness, as if it belonged to me, was mine and meant me. I slip uneasily into otherness, and feel foolish; into exactly one of the prominent binaries many of us profess we are so eager to dismantle, and yet the slips and starts of our speaking days, and silent nation-hood, reinvest them with power daily.

I hear no other answers, and we move on. I want to connect the discourses on race and nation spoken here with my students' lives and work. Those black and Asian bodies that interrupt the whiteness of rural Devon feel lonely, fit in, or get angry. This is New York City and the discourse on race and performance is bubbling: Tell me something... I think of Eleanor Grant of Inkworks' in Bristol, who spoke passionately at Dartington in January about Black Arts in Britain, about racism and her work as a Black Arts programmer. I remember the line of students at her desk afterwards asking for information. In *Performing Hybridities* I asked of Britain, in part because I thought I had heard Englishness, and of course I did, despite the silence at my question. We all spoke English in that room; the way our syllables are carved shift and occlude or include us, make mistakes, mask origin and reinforce it, raise status, mark as Other. I don't believe in faeries or originary Englishes, but I am English nonetheless, and know our love affair with originariness. But I cannot find these discourses here.

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Glenda Dickerson stands in a plenary session and the chair doesn't recognise her: "You don't recognise me?" she booms, and grins. This woman who spoke of raising women warriors at Spelman College, of putting love into the curriculum, stands and asks this man to recognise her. These black faces figure powerfully for me, living in the Devon countryside. And this makes me slightly uneasy. I know this is the politics of the visible here at play—I am simply moved by seeing a black woman as Dean of TSOA (Mary Schmidt Campbell). This touches me and goes beyond me. Amanda Grant, Anna Scott, and Sheila Richardson dance, sing, strut, and shout their conference papers/performances, refuse to see the intellectual and the passionate as antithetical. Their woven stories of research in South Africa, Brazil, and Belize invoke themselves at the centre of their fieldwork. The meeting of cultures takes place in these African American women, in Africa and its diaspora, and in "America." This claiming and braving of history and immediacy is vigorous, frivolous, and wise.

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I know almost no one, and in these social in-between/reception places I feel it keenly. I stand alone sipping beer. I speak to a woman from Yugoslavia who had complained about the lack of international perspectives at the conference; we smile, and she moves away. I meet, with relief, a group of men from Salford, Manchester. This is a good connection to make because of the similarities between their work and our work in Performance Technology at Dartington, where students can take honours degrees in music with performance technology as their instrument. But this is New York, and my biggest conversations are with the British contingent; we cling together like new immigrants.

At the first plenary, I listen to Dick Hebdige, witty, urbane, describing a tutorial with one of his students. Marvelous ramblings in which the said student (Bob) describes a project he would like to do on plastic bags full of water used to repel flies in Mexican houses. I listen as Hebdige goes on to describe the development of a writing programme at CalArts (California Institute of the Arts). I am reminded of Performance Writing at Dartington, which teaches writing in relation to performance, and in practice might be sculpture, installation, dance, spoken text, or sound work. Hebdige delights in the wackiness of undergraduate meanderings, and the rich possibilities of writing as art-practice.

In a session called Performative Writing, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick speaks movingly about her classes in writing at Duke. One of the assignments for this class is to produce writing that *does* something. She describes the consequent action of one group of students who painted the benches outside a campus fraternity with all the slogans that had been hurled at passing women by the men who sat there during the day. These benches were then photographed, and the pictures published in the college newspaper, with the caption, "Say just what you mean." Sedgwick does not exclude the writing of her paper and speaking it before us from "doing something," and offers her syllabi from these writing classes to anyone who is interested. This lack of preciousness and the willingness to share new practice enact the performativity she describes: it makes her writing get its butt off the page and get going. When these "performing spaces" refuse to be a vacuum filled with academic repartee, the effect is immediate, startling. At the end of his paper, "Unsafe," Michael Warner makes an open call for people to attend a meeting in NYC a few days later about the crisis in the perception of safe sex/AIDS in Manhattan. Lynda Hart gives out a homophobia hot line number, and speaks of E-mail connections that can muster broad support, rapidly, fervently. These words/this platform should DO.

[...] I kept hearing a quiet litany: performance studies at NYU and Northwestern, performance studies at NYU and Northwestern... As if these were the only places engaged in this kind of work.

"Special" is stamped on my hand from the Fez the night before, and Baz Kershaw and I enter Bobst, the NYU library. The overwhelming impact of 12 stories of football-pitch-sized space on our small British bodies: all of Dartington would fit in this space that signifies monumental presence. On the 12th floor, Orlan⁴ stands beside me ordering vermouth. Earlier that day: I attend a session called Gendering the Medical Body. I have heard about Orlan, and sit on the second row because I want to look, I want to see. But I cannot

look at this surgery, and I cannot leave. I watch this silent speaking body being injected, sliced, instruments scrape terribly under her skin. My eyes smart. This is brutal, arrogant. I am furious. I imagine my mother leaving in a huff, saying "It's just not really necessary, is it?" Orlan sits before me, her small body, neat and closed beneath the gaping video images behind her. Her paper, translated by three people, is read by a man. Once it is over, Phil Auslander gives his paper on Orlan, sitting beside her. As he begins, she shakes her head slowly, repeatedly. My fascination and my uneasiness throws my looking back at myself. Orlan argues that this is a critique of plastic surgery, yet she is not against plastic surgery for women who are unhappy with their bodies. Constructed as she might be, she does not disrupt radically any normative notions of Western white female beauty. Only the strange lozenge-shaped lumps above her eyes, her plastic looking cheeks... I think of her real pain; the circus of the operating theatre, with its signing for the deaf on a muted video. Only the sound of this young man, reading Orlan's mediated words... On the 12th floor of the library with no inside, Orlan looks a little lost. This small woman eats fruit salad, is quite polite, and I pass her the spoon to scoop grapes, melon, strawberries. I cannot fix her in any way. Difficult performance practice. My eyes and my propriety, my nauseous unease.

On the day I am to leave Manhattan I fumble with the double keys of my safety deposit box and say good-bye to the operator who has politely connected my endless calls. She asks me where I am from and tells me her daughter had gone to England. I continue fumbling and offer distracted pleasantries. She said that yes, she was on the Lockerbie flight. Here in this small room, I look at this African American woman whose daughter died in my country; these are the nations I feel. She tells me how her daughter had called from London and told her she'd managed to get photos of the guards at Buckingham Palace smiling, and asked her mother if she wanted her to send them. No, she said, you'll be home in a few weeks. Winter 1988, and I am home in England for the first time in 18 months from graduate school. There is a terrible air crash. We sit in quiet horror watching the images. Accident investigators find Kisha's photographs, retrieve them, and send them to her mother in New York. She says to me now, "You know I got those photographs." I think of Meena Alexander saying, "Your Prince Charles" to me and wonder what it is that I own.

This was a "bumper" conference, both in scale and in the range of ideas. I felt privileged to have been there, but perhaps this was also part of the problem. In the plethora of papers, performances, and discussions at this conference, I kept hearing a quiet litany: performance studies at NYU and Northwestern, performance studies at NYU and Northwestern... As if these were the only places engaged in this kind of work. As the days went on, I could feel this great arch across "America" between New York and Chicago, quietly asserting itself; the spine of performance studies in the world today. Such litanies betray a tendency for the United States to look in upon itself, and there is a danger that performance studies, for all its radical notions of "discipline" and critical practice, will continue to be this United States having a conversation with itself. So many of the papers and performances I heard and saw started from the U.S. and ended up there, as if the U.S. were some secret originary for all this work. It is simply not true that NYU and Northwestern are the only places engaged in this kind of work. There are several institutions in the UK (for example) that claim a broad understanding of "performance," and are actively engaged in the live-art debates in Europe: Crewe and Alsager at Manchester Metropolitan University, Dartington College of Arts, De Montford University. Performance studies needs to problematise its own processes of naming itself, and to ac-

knowledge that similar work will not necessarily be called the same thing, and might begin and end up outside of the U.S. There needs to be a vigorous effort to include international perspectives on this work at future conferences, and to make sure that these delegates are included in the chatter between NYU and Northwestern: Say just what you mean.

Notes

1. Inkworks is a Black Arts centre in Bristol, England, that promotes and produces theatre, film, dance, mime, visual art, writing, and carnival for the Afro-Caribbean community in Bristol. Contact: Eleanor Grant, Black Arts Development Officer, Inkworks, 20-22 Hepburn Road, St. Pauls, Bristol BS2 8UD, England. Tel: (0117) 942 1870.
2. Orlan is a French performance artist who is in the process of reconstructing her face through plastic surgery, and staging this surgery as her artwork. Each operation is filmed and transmitted live via satellite to locations around the world. Whilst her paper was read at the Future of the Field conference, a section of the surgical performance ran on a screen behind the speakers. Orlan teaches at the Dijon School of Art, France.

Jools Gilson-Ellis won the 1987 Colorado Graduate Scholarship from the University of Lancaster. A performer, researcher, and lecturer, she was Special Lecturer in Drama in the Department of Drama at the University of Hull from 1990-1992. She is presently Lecturer in Theatre at Dartington College of Arts. Her most recent performance work, a dance/installation entitled Difficult Joys, premiered at the University of Surrey, Department of Dance "Border Tensions" conference in April 1995. Current research work is focused on British and American women performance writers.